

# **Mississippi Oral History Program**

## **An Oral History with Mr. William E. Spell**

Interviewer: Steve Patterson

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## Biography

Born in Georgetown, Mississippi, in 1925, William E. Spell descended from an old Mississippi family. Upon graduating Georgetown High School, he entered the United States Army/Air Force. After a stint in the service, he attended Mississippi College and took a degree in business administration in 1950. Eight years later, Spell entered law school and in the early 1960s passed the bar exam.

By 1965, Spell joined Senator Stennis's staff as a personal assistant and remained in that position until 1970. Spell, then, was assistant to the senator during the period when the Mississippi Testing Facility was built, and his oral history deals largely with its operation.

## AN ORAL HISTORY

with

MR. WILLIAM E. SPELL

*This is an interview with Bill Spell in conjunction with The University of Southern Mississippi and the Stennis Space Center. The interview is being conducted in Bill Spell's office on April 22, 1993. The interviewer is Steven Patterson.*

**Patterson:** Just to get some background information from you, Mr. Spell, when and where were you born?

**Spell:** Well, I was born in Georgetown, Mississippi, in 1925. November 22, 1925.

**Patterson:** Was your family, were your parents—were they long-time Mississippians?

**Spell:** Yes, my family is long-time settlers in this state, probably five or six generations.

**Patterson:** What about your education, college?

**Spell:** Well, I went to high school. Graduated from Georgetown High School, then went into the service. Spent two years in the United States Army/Air Force, as it was known then. I came back and attended Mississippi College and graduated in 1950 with a degree in business administration.

**Patterson:** Yes sir. Did you go into law school then?

**Spell:** No, I worked for awhile. Then in 1958 I started to law school and graduated from law school and passed the bar; I think it was 1961 or '2. I can't remember.

**Patterson:** Yes sir. When did you first start working for Senator Stennis?

**Spell:** I started working for Senator Stennis on December the fifteenth, 1963. And I worked for him almost exactly six years. I left Washington and came back to Mississippi on January 1, 1970.

**Patterson:** Yes sir. Just out of curiosity, how did you get the job with Senator Stennis?

**Spell:** Well, I got run out of Mississippi.

**Patterson:** (laughter)

**Spell:** That's literally the truth.

**Patterson:** Do you want to go into that any more now or save that?

**Spell:** No, well, if you are interested in it.

**Patterson:** Sure.

**Spell:** I'll tell you precisely how. In 1963 I was vice president of a trade association that represented the oil industry. And I was the supporter of a gubernatorial candidate that opposed the candidate who won, Paul Johnson.

**Patterson:** Yes sir.

**Spell:** That candidate, Mr. Johnson, after he was elected and some of his supporters told the people at the association where I was employed when Mr. Johnson took office, [said] I should not be on their payroll. Otherwise, they had problems. And so some friends of the other candidate looked about and tried to help me find somewhere to go. And I went to work for Senator Stennis. Not as a political appointee, but as a staff member on the Armed Services Committee. And it was an appointment that was filled through the process of selection. It had nothing to do with—the actual appointment had nothing to do with politics. The opportunity to apply did have something to do with politics.

**Patterson:** Sure.

**Spell:** Senator Stennis informed me of the position that would be available and told me to apply. I applied and was selected. I served a year on that Armed Services Committee staff, and he asked me if I would then come and become his personal assistant.

**Patterson:** Yes sir. Well, what about Stennis and the Mississippi Test Facility? When did he first become really interested in that?

**Spell:** Well, he became interested in that long before I began to work for him. What I know of the early years of the test facility, I know only because of what others have told me, including Senator Stennis. We did talk about it on many occasions. During all the time I was employed by Senator Stennis, that became a subject that we had to deal with

frequently, and as a result of all of that contact and discussions, I learned a lot about what went on in the early days.

**Patterson:** You said you first started working for him in 1963 then, so were you around when he was down there and talked to the landowners in Hancock County to give up their land?

**Spell:** I did not go with him down there then and I don't recall exactly when that was. I thought that was a little bit before 1963.

**Patterson:** Yes sir.

**Spell:** But I'm not certain. It might not have been. But I do remember hearing some stories about when he went down there and talked to them. There was severe hostility in the early days from some of the people.

**Patterson:** Sure. The same thing happened in the early days, he was assuring them, you know, of the longevity. And the same thing happened in 1970, also.

**Spell:** Right, right. Well, I was familiar with the 1970 effort. And I know a lot about what went on then. In the early days, when the decision was first made to locate there, Stennis went down and was talking to some of the landowners who would have to give up their land. And they were really hostile according to some of the stories and reports. In fact, on one occasion they crowded around the senator's car and just told him he better not get out, the best thing he could do was just keep on riding. But he didn't. He got out and he talked to them. In time, they were persuaded, and in time, I think everybody was convinced that that was a very wise move to put the facility there. It has been a very valuable asset to the state and to the people in that area.

**Patterson:** I have down here, I believe it's in July of 1968, Stennis got you to meet with Harry Singer from NASA for a solution to the MTF problem?

**Spell:** Well, I don't recall that name specifically, but I remember that we met frequently with a great number of people. We were constantly working on a NASA problem of some sort.

**Patterson:** Yes sir.

**Spell:** There were some unique problems and there were some routine problems. Especially unique and interesting problems. And there were some equally unique solutions applied.

**Patterson:** Could you just give me an example of something that you can think of off the top of your head?

**Spell:** Well, the guy that was the head of that thing at the time was a guy named Jackson Balch. We called him Jack Balch. The first time I saw Jack Balch I thought, "My Lord, what is this?" And then after about thirty seconds, or a couple of minutes, it became obvious to me that the guy had a great deal of knowledge about what he was talking about. He had a rather engaging personality if one understood what his objectives were and how dedicated he was to obtaining them. Over the years we developed a very close working relationship. As a result of our relationship and as a result of Stennis's position, being a member of the space committee—then it was called the National Aeronautics and Space Committee—being a member of the Appropriations Committee and being a member of the Armed Services Committee, he was in a very key position to deal with NASA in many areas. So he was in a rather influential and critical position and could influence a lot of things that NASA was interested in and that were really essential to NASA. So Jack Balch became a source of information not only on the problems that were regional or local interest but to some of the national philosophies of NASA. And it became apparent to me rather quickly that Balch's ideas were pretty much parallel to those of Stennis, in that he didn't have any use for the bureaucracy. There was a great bit of useless red tape, arraying of bureaucratic language, a lot of problems that really didn't need to exist in NASA caused by turf battles and other things. To make a long story short—when I started out talking about some unusually unique experiences. It became apparent to somebody at NASA headquarters in Washington that Jack Balch was a pain in the butt and that when Jack Balch got irritated with some problem or policy with NASA that it ultimately got escalated to Washington and caused serious problems, at a very high level, for NASA. So they put out a directive that nobody at a center of Jack Balch's category should have any contact with Washington except through the NASA officials.

**Patterson:** That was aimed directly at him, huh?

**Spell:** Absolutely directly at him. Because they wanted to shut him up.

**Patterson:** Yes sir.

**Spell:** So he told me, "I can't talk to you guys any more." And that infuriated Stennis: the very idea that somebody would try to cut off that source of information that he had. Because he thought he was entitled to it as a matter of law. And it was a facility in his state about which he could not inform himself through direct contact with the people who operated it. It just infuriated him.

The head of the Huntsville center that had supervision over the NASA site in Mississippi was to visit and was to come to Jack Balch's office. By pre-arrangement, we made a deal with Jack Balch—at my suggestion, as a matter of fact. But Jack did not hesitate to go along with it. I said, “Look, you know when that guy is going to be in your office.” At 10:30 in the morning or whatever time it was—“I'm going to arrange for Stennis to call you. You've got a speaker phone”—it was Jack's habit just to talk over the speaker phone. He had his hands going with papers and so when he needed to answer the phone he'd just mash a button and put it on the speaker. I said, “When the phone rings at 10:30 or whatever time it is just mash the speaker phone and it's going to be Senator Stennis. Your secretary is saying, ‘Senator Stennis is there, do you not want to take the call?’ ” Sure enough, Stennis rang up the secretary and the secretary asked Jack Balch, “Do you want to talk to Stennis?” The head of the Huntsville facility was in the office. There was a moment of pandemonium and then the director from Huntsville said, “Yes, you better take it.” So he took it. And the Senator started out by saying, “Jack, old boy, I hadn't heard from you in a while. You know, I depend upon you a whole lot down there now to tell me what's going on. I need to know all these things. I hadn't heard from you, old boy; you getting along all right?” (laughter) And Jack in the presence of the guy who put the order out said, “Well, Senator, I can't talk to you any more.”

“What's the matter, you can't talk to me.”

“Well, they put out this order that said I'm not supposed to talk to anybody in Washington without going through the Huntsville center and letting them carry on that conversation with you.”

And Stennis never did use profanity but he said, “Well, my Lord! Goodness gracious, that's terrible. Who put that order out?” And the story goes that the guy who put it out was frantically waving at Jack Balch saying, you know, “Just be quiet, go ahead and talk to him.”

**Patterson:** Sure.

**Spell:** So that ended that. Then we got the communication started back. So Jack continued to have his pipeline into Washington. And he continued to have the influence that was necessary to get the help he needed down at the Mississippi site.

**Patterson:** Well, NASA, the higher-ups, were scared of Stennis's political power, weren't they? Because he was the chairman of the Armed Services Committee and on the—



**Spell:** Sure, he had tremendous influence there. As a matter of fact, I think that place was located there because of Stennis's relationship with the senator of Oklahoma who was then the head of the space committee, Senator Kerr. Stennis just had a tremendous amount of influence. You know, they told Jack to stay out of Washington. They wouldn't give him any expenses to travel. So he would travel to NASA headquarters, conduct his business, go on leave, official leave, take vacation time, and then spend an extra couple of days in Washington on leave. And then go back. It took them a while to figure out he was doing that.

In fact, they stumbled upon him once upon a time. One of the NASA Washington officials ran into him walking down the hall of the Senate Office Building. And that caused a commotion. You know, I'm painting a pretty bad picture of NASA to some extent. And that really is not totally accurate. What I'm talking about is a very small part of the total operation. By and large, NASA in its early days was a very effective organization. It had a lot of political support and it managed that support wisely.

**Patterson:** You are saying in its early days.

**Spell:** In its early days. Right. I suppose that there has been no organization that has been more technically effective and technically competent, from a management standpoint, that has been more innovative than NASA headquarters. But as the space program began to become more routine and competition for the government dollars got tighter and harder, there began to develop some bureaucracy, some bureaucratic inclinations in NASA, that became more oriented toward protecting turf than achieving objectives. That's where they got off line.

**Patterson:** Sure. What about after the moon shot? What did Stennis think would happen to MTF?

**Spell:** Well, there was always some question. I can't remember a time when there was not some doubt about what the Mississippi facility's future might be. There was just always some doubt because either a program would be expanding in NASA and there would be some competition to try to find out where that expansion was going to be located. Or there was a reduction and there was a competition to try and determine who was going to be eliminated. And then as the objectives in space became more operational, or routine, a lot of the urgency and priorities began to fade. And NASA became just another competitor, over a period of time, for the nationally-appropriated dollar.

**Patterson:** Sure.

**Spell:** So then the bureaucrats got to operating. At first, NASA tried to protect itself against the other government agencies. And then the various programs and regional centers and other divisions within NASA began to fight amongst themselves about who was going to survive and who was going to live and who was going to be cut back. Hell, it became a long, extended series of arguments over roles and missions and turf. It just got to be a hell of a bureaucratic scramble.

**Patterson:** And MTF was usually at the bottom of the totem pole. Or had the reputation as the stepchild.

**Spell:** Yes. See, NASA had some sort of a pecking order that they had. I mean you had to—of course, the head knocker was up at the NASA headquarters. Then you had certain centers and they had certain categories and then under that you had various other lesser categories of field locations. The Mississippi Test Facility, generally and until I guess—only I don't know when it got designated as a center or sort of upgraded in this pecking order. But it was always at the bottom of the stack. You had to prove not only that you knew what the hell you were doing, but you had to go through all this business of fighting off the big boys that were on top of you.

**Patterson:** Sure. Well, what about the multiple agency idea? Do you know where that originated?

**Spell:** I sure do. It originated in the head of Jackson Balch. And we had an awful lot of fun with that concept. Jackson Balch and three or four other people, but primarily Jack Balch, put together this idea of the multi-agencies. Then we set about trying to collect all the interrelated or synergistically potential agencies and operations that might be located down at Mississippi. And we set out to try to attract them down there. That was a kind of a long, extended journey that had a lot of bumps and a lot of detours and a lot of disappointments. But also a lot of good results.

One of the things that Jack Balch wanted, was to make that a center where the government could exchange its technology, and could apply that technology developed through the government with the civilian operations and the general business education and other aspects of our society and our economy. He had a concept that if you put all of these interrelated agencies down there like—and I can't remember them all. There was the operation that would allow the satellites to take photographs and those photographs could be translated into maps, translated into a lot of other things that would show mineral deposits, heat, rainfall, measure crops—do a whole lot of things. His idea was to collect people that were scattered around all over the country and put them down there at one site and let them operate together. The end product of their combined operations would be

much greater than the total of the sum of their individual operation. He was pretty successful in that.

NASA at one point decided that they wanted to—they didn't want to close up the base but they wanted to mothball it, or mothball a great portion of it. So Jack decided that they really maybe ought to get another government agency that would require a lot of that territory to start expressing an interest in it. And he did. Can we break for just a minute?

(The interview continues on tape one, side two.)

**Spell:** Jack got the idea that if he started this competition amongst the various agencies that he might make NASA believe that they were going to lose that facility. So he got the Army, through Stennis, interested in putting up an ammunition plant, which was not the kind of thing that Jack had in mind for utilizing that facility for. Particularly if it would take some of the land that he needed for these other more sophisticated projects. But through our help he got this issue going. We got the Army to investigate it and it turned out that there was an apparent need for an ammunition facility. And the NASA site was a pretty good prospect. Then Jack discovered that he was about to be successful in taking up and losing a great part of his land down there. Then he decided, hell, the ammunition plant wasn't a good idea because it was going to have rather low-skilled production type workers and he wanted a rather high-level scientific community. And he wanted to stop it. And we said, "No, you can't stop it. We really need that and we want it. You can put in over there on one side of the installation and forget about it. But if the Army wants to put it there, we'll put it there."

Well, it turns out that it came and it stayed there, but there was a tremendous battle going on between the North and the South. And some of the northern congressmen and senators made it very difficult to keep that plant there. They added on a lot of things. They were fighting the game just like we were, so they used their position of influence to run the cost of operating that plant up so high that it eventually closed down.

**Patterson:** How were they able to run the cost up like that?

**Spell:** Well, they, for example, required that the Corps of Engineers come in and do certain studies and prove a lot of the construction. And as anybody who has ever done business with the Corps of Engineers can tell you, if you want to triple the cost of the project just get the Corps to build it. They did a lot of foolish things like moving railroads, moving things that were already built that were redundant.

**Patterson:** Sure.

**Spell:** Causing a lot of construction to be made to standards that really weren't required. Then the other people from other parts of the country that were—the problem was that this was a very modern facility, an ammunition manufacturing facility. The facilities that this one was competing against in Mississippi were located in Pennsylvania and, I believe, Maine or Massachusetts or Michigan. Some of those plants were over a hundred years old. Considerably over a hundred years old, as I recall. And were inefficient—had old, antiquated equipment. This was an automated assembly line.

So what they did was they began to whittle at and remove all of those things that made the Mississippi plant cost effective. Instead of manufacturing three or four types of ammunition, all of which had common parts, some of the old ammunition plants—some of the senators where these old ammunition plants were located managed to get some legislation written and managed to take some steps that reduced the effectiveness of the Mississippi plant and therefore, allowed these other, older plants to remain cost effective. And so we just sort of went down the tube.

**Patterson:** Speaking of the land after a while, I guess around 1969, 1970, there was a rumor that a hundred and forty thousand acres that NASA had an easement on would be returned to the county. What did Stennis think about that?

**Spell:** Well, I don't recall specifically what Stennis thought about that. I recall that being discussed and I recall that Jack Balch was opposed to it. The thought was that a great effort had been made to acquire that land. It gave that facility a uniqueness that could not be found in many places over the country. That it would be in the best interest of the state of Mississippi and those local areas down there to maintain that status at least for some extended period so that all of the possibilities for the use of it could be fully explored. It was along about the time that all of that was under serious consideration that my contact with that situation began to become more infrequent. So I don't recall exactly.

**Patterson:** Oh, yes.

**Spell:** I don't recall exactly what happened.

(brief interruption)

**Patterson:** All right, let's talk about it now. I've seen monetary values assigned to MTF.

**Spell:** Excuse me; if I'm answering these questions too long let me know.

**Patterson:** OK, no, that's fine. I like the stories, anyway. I've seen values anywhere from a hundred and fifty million to four hundred million as opposed to the cost of MTF. It

seems to me that Balch preferred the higher figure but when Hlass came in—I don't know; you said that you may have been a lot more infrequent after that—but Hlass preferred the lower figure. What I'm getting at basically is that Stennis—a term that I see a lot of times is “full utilization,” and it seems to me that he and Balch, if they could get that figure high, four hundred million of the cost of MTF, then maybe they could keep it from being closed.

**Spell:** Well, let me tell you, with all deference and respect to Mr. Hlass and his successors, nobody, absolutely nobody, was ever as effective a manager as was Jack Balch. Jack Balch had the courage of a tiger, and he had the tenacity of a tiger, but he was a super intellect. He just had a great deal of personal dedication and ability. And he didn't give a diddly-damn about the bureaucracy.

**Patterson:** He really had the reputation as a renegade.

**Spell:** Well, he was a renegade, but he was a renegade that was smart and he understood what he was doing. And he deplored those who were so distracted because they were trying to protect their own selfish bureaucratic interests or too slow to understand what was going on. Jack Balch was an energetic sort of guy that knew what the hell he was doing and went out and did it. If it hadn't been for him, that place would be broom sage and mushrooms by now.

(brief interruption)

**Patterson:** Do you really think that Balch was mistreated by NASA?

**Spell:** Oh, I don't think he was mistreated. I think they dealt with him about like you would expect them to deal with him. And I don't think it bothered him a damn bit.

**Patterson:** Just rolled off his back.

**Spell:** Well, every now and then he'd get a little bit fed up and he had a rather unique way of dealing with that. When he got all the bureaucracy that he could stand, he'd book him a ticket on a banana boat and go to Honduras and ride a donkey and walk up and down the beaches for a couple of weeks.

**Patterson:** Sure. Would you say that Balch and Stennis are the two people most responsible for keeping MTF open? Without a doubt?

**Spell:** Beyond a doubt, beyond a doubt. If it had not been for the two of them it would have been long gone.

**Patterson:** Being somebody that has been close to both of them, could you maybe contrast the two of them. Or how maybe they got along, Balch and Stennis got along?

**Spell:** They got along very well. They got along very well, but they were totally different type people. Stennis was a very polite; Jack was polite as far as that goes. Stennis was a—well, I'll put it this way, they had a lot of things in common, but they were also different in many ways. Some of the things that they had in common was that they were both very practical people. And they were both very intelligent. They both understood the system. And they understood people. And they understood the bureaucracy.

(brief interruption)

**Patterson:** All right, let's pick back up with—you were talking about Balch and Stennis.

**Spell:** Oh, I was talking about some of the good, some of the points they had in common.

**Patterson:** Yes.

**Spell:** Some of the points that they were a little bit different: Stennis was a great deal more diplomatic than Jack. Stennis and Jack, they sort of had different interests. They had different social interests, but they had a common interest in building NASA, the test facility in Mississippi.

**Patterson:** Sure. What about Stennis's feelings about the facility down there? I mean, I know it's named for him now, obviously and everything, but did he see it mainly as a way to get the jobs in Mississippi and develop Mississippi?

**Spell:** Well, he was interested in getting jobs in Mississippi, but he was interested more than anything else in making the tax dollars work to the best advantage to the taxpayer. And he was convinced that first, the mission was to, as he says, "Test those rockets." And then the second thing after that was over, after they had pretty much done what they needed to do and it became a production facility, he then wanted to look to broader horizons. He really wanted to utilize it fully and effectively so the taxpayer would get full value for the dollar that was invested there. At the same time, he wanted to use it to create jobs and economic activity in Mississippi.

**Patterson:** Well, I think for Stennis, too, wouldn't you agree that there is a link between the space and the military aspects, military usage of space?

**Spell:** Somewhat. There is no question but what the intelligence and the communications of the military has been greatly enhanced as a result of what happened in space.

**Patterson:** This is a little bit after your time but this is just something that I'm curious about. At Stennis in 1973 when they got the go ahead for the solid rocket motor for the shuttle and a firm out in Utah got it called Thiokol. And Lockheed had supposedly underbid them and was going to do the work down at Hancock County but Thiokol gets the contract, and James Fletcher was head of NASA at the time, and he was from Utah. And so was Frank Moss, the senator who was the space committee—he was from Utah also. But Stennis didn't put up too much of a fight here in '73; it was mainly Bill Waller.

**Spell:** The hell that it did. Bill Waller didn't have a damn thing to do with it. John Stennis not only put up the fight—are you talking about in 1973?

**Patterson:** Seventy-three, yes sir.

**Spell:** That's a bunch of bullshit. That was a—I'm not sure when you type this up you ought to play this explicit, but no, no—

**Patterson:** So it wasn't Bill Waller then?

**Spell:** No, hell no. Bill Waller didn't have anything to do with it. He didn't even know—I can tell you exactly what happened, because I was involved in it. I represented Lockheed Propulsion Company at the time. And I think anything that I say to you should be—you need to know that because I may be somewhat prejudiced in my view toward Lockheed. No, let me tell you exactly what happened on that. That's a complicated deal, but it boiled down to Aero-jet, Lockheed, and Thiokol. Thiokol was going to manufacture these things in Utah and move them by rail across the country. They had some problems with that, so they had to design this deal so they could break it up into four sections. The Lockheed design was designed—they were going to manufacture theirs in New Orleans. And they had a plant at Michoud, or were going to have a plant at Michoud, and they were going to transport them by barge. So they could transport them in larger sections. Well, to make a long story short, when the competition criteria was evaluated there was every indication that Lockheed had the best proposal.

And this was a very unusual thing. The entire delegation of Mississippi, congressional delegation, senators and congressmen, and they had some powerful people in there at the time. You had Senator Long, who was chairman of the Finance Committee; you had Senator Ellender, who was chairman of the Appropriations Committee; Senator Stennis, who was chairman of the Armed Services Committee at the time. Maybe it was the preparedness investigating sub-committee, but he was on the—it might not have

been—yes, he was, he was chairman of the Armed Services Committee at the time. He was also on the appropriations sub-committee for NASA. He was on the space committee. He had Jamie Whitten over on the House side, who was the ranking member of the House Appropriations Committee, I believe, at the time. There was just an awful lot of power in that group. The congressional delegations of Mississippi and Louisiana, best of my recollection—they all filed a protest and signed the protest with the General Accounting Office. And they didn't get anywhere. Nobody could understand that because they were putting the heat on Fletcher. Fletcher was protecting his home state. But everybody was putting the heat on Fletcher. And it was just impossible to understand how all of these powers in Congress could not seem to be getting their message through to Fletcher. He just wasn't afraid of them.

Well, as it turned out, that was a period of time when [Gerald] Ford was very influential. He was to become vice president at about that time. He was the minority leader of the House, and he was very close to Richard Nixon. In fact, Richard Nixon finally made him vice president. It turned out that Gerry Ford was a very close, personal friend and associate and shared some common interests and efforts with a vice president of Thiokol. And Thiokol had its political pressures and powers lined up, and they were at the only level above the congressional level that we had that could have trumped our efforts. And so Fletcher was getting a lot of heat from these congressmen and senators. But he was being told from the White House, Richard Nixon, and Gerald Ford and the administration, “Don't worry about that, you are doing all right. You just stay right on that course.”

**Patterson:** Of course, there were a lot of gaps in the Thiokol bid, right?

**Spell:** Oh, yes.

**Patterson:** Seventy million.

**Spell:** Well, we had a hearing. That thing was contested. Let me go back and don't be so hard on old Bill Waller; now, Waller lent his name to it. But Waller really didn't have anything to do with it. He wanted to win it, obviously, and he would have done anything that he could to win it. And he tried—

**Patterson:** But he didn't have the power that Stennis had.

**Spell:** He didn't have any. What he did was not anything. I also think that you should also understand that there is a little bit of prejudice in my view of Waller. Even though we have been friends for a long period of time, he ran against and defeated my law partner, Charlie Sullivan, for governor. But Bill Waller and I have been friends. We've



tried cases against each other. We've been to social engagements and been long-time friends. His wife was a college mate of mine. But the governor was just not in a position to do what those congressmen and senators did. It turned out that the senators and the congressmen were not in a very strong position because Fletcher had all the support he needed from the people that he really had to be responsive to.

**Patterson:** I've heard some talk down there that because Thiokol built it, then they had to ship it across country on the trains in segments, that's why they had so many problems, specifically with the *Challenger*.

**Spell:** Well, you know the *New York Times* wrote an article about that. Long after that thing—when they had some problems with it that arose, the *New York Times* did an investigation. And the fellow who headed up Lockheed Propulsions' task force was a smart guy named Al Vonderesh [?]. And I was sitting here one day and old Al Vonderesh called down here and said the *New York Times* was calling him and wanted to know why that rocket blew up, or some damn thing, and he wanted to know what I knew about it or had heard about it. And we talked about it and there is no doubt but Vonderesh thought his plan was the best plan. There is no doubt that what he had, he had the heaviest horsepower that could be assembled in Washington, short of the president of the United States, on his side. But that horsepower wasn't enough to get it.

**Patterson:** Well, what about—this may be somewhat of a vague question. What about Nixon and NASA? Was he an advocate of it?

**Spell:** I really don't know. I don't know very much about that White House. I don't really know. I remember that one time Stennis and—the story goes and it's a true story according to some of the people who were there—you know, Eastland was inclined to have a few drinks after hours, and sometimes during hours. The senator from Mississippi, the chairman of the Judiciary Committee, and he and Stennis along with some other senators were over at the White House. And the President was explaining some deal, giving them some briefing, and Stennis and Eastland were on the front row, and Eastland kept interrupting him. Finally, Stennis just reached over and patted Eastland on the leg and said, "Jim, Jim, Jim, let the boy talk." (laughter) But I don't know about it; I don't know about his relationship with NASA.

**Patterson:** It just seems so ironic to me that, you know, so much of NASA was started, you know, after JFK was assassinated and that really gave it the impetus. And that the moon shot happened while Nixon was President, you know, after the election in 1960, when JFK beat him. Anyway, I always thought that was just one of the ironies of history right there, that after all, Nixon was president.

That's really about all that I have. Is there anything else that you want to tell me about Stennis and NASA or any other stories that you can think of?

**Spell:** No, I just think that Stennis was a pioneer for the space program, and he felt that it added a lot of power to the United States. He was particularly interested in the space program, not only for what it did in outer space, but for all the technology that was developed that had a domestic application.

**Patterson:** Sure.

**Spell:** And for that reason I think he felt that those dollars were very well spent. And then after going to space got to be sort of routine, he was a strong advocate of making full use of all of the technology and all of the things that could be utilized with this additional platform in space. And he felt that Mississippi should play a role in that effort. And that to do so would provide an opportunity where the state could have a concentration of highly skilled and well-educated, highly trained people who would permit our citizens to make two or three very, very strong leaps forward, and long leaps forward, away from what we had generally come to accept. And that is the lesser skilled activities.

**Patterson:** Well, why did you quit working for him in 1970?

**Spell:** Well, when I went up there I didn't intend to stay as long as I did. I left to find a place of refuge. But I had always intended to come back and I knew that I was going to come back. Two things happened. One, I got to the point where I had to change because I was running out of years. I came back when I was forty-five years old. I knew that if I was going to come back, I had to come back while I was young enough to get my roots established. And an opportunity arose where I could come back and I did. So it just turned out. But he was very cooperative and very understanding. And knew from the beginning, I told him two things when I went there, "Senator, I'm here because I've got some friends who opened a door, but I'm here and I'm going to stand on my own bottom. I'm going to carry my share of the load. That's what I'm expected to do and that's what I will do. But I do not intend to become a career Washington native or a Washington worker or a government employee. I intend to go back to Mississippi and take my family back." He knew that and he supported it from the very beginning.

**Patterson:** Well, thank you very much for taking the time.

**Spell:** Thank you.

(end of the interview)